

What Was Pentecost?

Introduction

Most of Christendom believes the significance of Pentecost was that it was the birth of the Church, the day the body of Christ came into existence (Acts 2). The basic argument is that since the Church is composed of believers indwelt with the Holy Spirit and that occurred at Pentecost, the Church began at Pentecost.¹ Superficially, such an argument seems to have merit. But upon closer examination the argument fails. The Biblical evidence forbids such an interpretation.

If Pentecost was not the birth of the Church, what was it? This study will examine what occurred at Pentecost, explain the significance of that day, and hopefully, end confusion surrounding it.

Preparation For Pentecost: God's Prophetic Plan

God's prophetic program governed Israel. That program operated under two great themes which defined Jewish theology. Those themes were the Day of the Lord and the Kingdom of God. The Day of the Lord was that period of time when God would pour His wrath upon the world in judgment (Zephaniah 1). The Kingdom of God on earth meant that the Messiah would rule Israel as King as well as the entire world and Israel would be the preeminent nation (Matthew 6.10; Psalm 2.6, 8; Zechariah 14.9). Israel's repentance was required for the Kingdom of God to come upon the earth (Matthew 23.37-39; Romans 11.25-26). The Day of the Lord will be the required catalyst for this event.

The Beginning of God's Prophetic Program

Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned God revealed a plan to redeem mankind and restore his lost position (Genesis 3.15). God provided no details about how or when He would accomplish

this. For 2,000 years, from Adam to Abraham, God disclosed Himself to all of mankind. That program ended in disappointment. Man continued to reject God and became so evil that God had to destroy almost the entire human race and restart civilization with Noah. Despite this new beginning, after only a couple hundred years, mankind again demonstrated contempt of God's revelation. In rebellion, man tried to access God and heaven through the building of the Tower of Babel. God had destroyed false religion in the Flood, but man restarted it and consolidated it at Babel (Babylon). Babel became the font of all false religion. Babel was also man's attempt to establish world government.² To thwart this evil, God confused man's language. This divided mankind with the result that men established nation states. Nations serve as a check on unlimited power. Thus, nationalism is a divine institution that restrains the absolute power that can be exercised under globalism and world government.

In about 2,000 B.C., God initiated a new program. By means of this program God no longer would reveal Himself to all mankind. Instead, He would reveal Himself to and through a special people, a new race. God began this new program with Abram (Abraham). God called Abram and established a covenant with him (Genesis 12.1-3). The provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant went through Isaac (Genesis 17.9) and Jacob (Genesis 28.13-15), the father of the Twelve tribes of Israel (the Jews). The covenant stated God would bless those who blessed the covenanted line (the Jews) and curse the one who cursed that line.³ The result of this covenant was that God's revelation of Himself and His blessing of the nations (Gentiles) would be mediated through Israel. All Gentile blessing from this time forward would come through Israel.

God made additional covenantal promises to Israel which expanded upon the foundational Abrahamic covenant. These were the Land, Mosaic, Sabbatic, Davidic, and New covenants.⁴ In

sum, they stated God would bless the world through Israel (the Jews), give the Jews most of the land in the Middle East, govern the Jews through the Law (written on tablets of stone but later upon the heart), and provide them with an eternal King from the line of King David. Also included in this program were promises that every Jew (not just a Jew of the tribe of Levi) would be a priest (Exodus 19.4-6; Zechariah 8.20-23) and that Israel would become the preeminent nation among the nations of the world (Deuteronomy 28.1-2, 13).

Everything in this program depended upon the Messiah. The prophetic literature revealed the Messiah would deliver Israel from its enemies (Luke 1.67-74) and reign as King. This was the Jew's great hope. Shrouded in much greater secrecy (a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma in Churchill's phraseology) was how the Messiah would deliver Israel from sin. Indeed, only one passage in the Old Testament indicated how this would be accomplished (Isaiah 53). In hindsight, this passage is clear. Christ took upon Himself mankind's sins and paid for them, satisfying the justice of God. But the Jews had no understanding of this passage. Even today, 2,000 years later, national Israel does not understand this passage (Romans 11.25). One day they will (Romans 11.26).

God's Prophetic Plan Concerning the Holy Spirit

What is outlined above is Jewish theology. Particularly relevant in this study is how God would bring about Israel's obedience. God revealed it would be done through the promise of the New Covenant: God promised He would place His Spirit within them and write His Law upon their hearts (Ezekiel 36.22-32; Jeremiah 31.31-34).

God had commissioned John the Baptist as the herald of the Messiah-King. He proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3.2). The kingdom of God was near because the King was present. God was ready to establish His kingdom on earth if the Jewish nation would repent. Jesus

echoed this same message (Matthew 4.17). But the Jews refused. Instead, they delivered Him to Pilate and demanded His death (Mark 15.13-14).

The Jews got what they wanted. Jesus was executed. But after three days in the earth He rose from the dead (Matthew 12.40, 28.5-9). The significance of His resurrection for His disciples was that since He was alive He could establish His kingdom. The establishment of God's earthly kingdom was their primary focus (Matthew 6.9-10). And why not? For three years, since the Lord had called them, He has spoken of little else. In anticipation, they questioned Him about it. Luke wrote:

⁴ Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1.4-6)?

Jesus had instructed them to remain in Jerusalem to await the Holy Spirit. But foremost of their mind was the kingdom. They expected Him to establish it soon. When they returned from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem, their first action was to fill Judas' vacant position (Acts 1.15-26). They knew twelve apostles had to be in place for the kingdom of God to come. They remembered the Lord's promise that they would sit upon twelve thrones ruling the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19.28). One did not forget such a promise.

The Feast of Pentecost

Pentecost was a Jewish feast day which occurred fifty days after the Feast of First Fruits. On the Feast of First Fruits, Jesus arose from the dead. So Pentecost occurred fifty days after our Lord's resurrection.

John the Baptist had baptized Israel with water. He had prophesied the Messiah would baptize the nation with the Holy Spirit (John 1.33) and with fire (Matthew 3.11; Luke 3.16).⁵ Jesus told his disciples He would give them another Comforter (John 14.16-18, 26, 15.26-27, 16.7-15) and to remain in Jerusalem to await His coming. He declared:

⁴⁴ Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." ⁵⁰ And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While He was blessing them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they, after worshiping Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and were continually in the temple praising God (Luke 24.44-53).

The Day of Pentecost

The apostles, all twelve now, obeyed the Lord's command. They waited in Jerusalem. This took patience and faith. The Lord told them He would send another Comforter and to remain in Jerusalem. He did not tell them *when* this would occur. "When" is God's great secret. He has told us what He will do. He has not told us *when* He will do it. The lesson for believers is to

obey and remain faithful. We may die before God's promises are fulfilled but we will live to see them fulfilled. This is faith and hope.

On the day of Pentecost, the Twelve and the 120 were gathered (Acts 2). They heard a sound like a great wind. Cloven tongues like fire appeared upon each of them. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in foreign languages. Jews who had come from other nations to celebrate the festival heard these local Jewish believers miraculously speaking their languages. They were stunned. They could not understand what was happening (Acts 2.12). Some said they were drunk. Alcohol can have a number of effects but learning and speaking a foreign language is not one of them. Peter responded that it was only 9 a.m. and they were not drunk. He provided the answer to what had happened (Acts 2.16) quoting Joel:

¹⁷ 'And it shall be in the last days,' God says, 'That I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ Even on My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy.¹⁹ 'And I will grant wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. ²⁰ 'The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come. ²¹ 'And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Acts 2.17-21).

Peter quoted Joel to reveal the meaning of Pentecost. Joel's prophecy dealt with the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord included God's sending forth His Holy Spirit, judging the earth in His wrath, establishing the Lord Jesus Christ upon the throne of David as the King of Israel and the world, and

creating a new heavens and new earth. Joel's prophecy dealt with two of these aspects: the New Covenant in which God would give His Holy Spirit to Israel and His wrath upon earth.

God had revealed He would give His Holy Spirit to Israel in two other key passages in addition to Joel: Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31. Ezekiel wrote:

²² "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. ²³ I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord," declares the Lord God, "when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight."²⁴ For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land.²⁵ Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶ Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. ²⁸ You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God. ²⁹ Moreover, I will save you from all your uncleanness; and I will call for the grain and multiply it, and I will not bring a famine on you. ³⁰ I will multiply the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field, so that you will not receive again the disgrace of famine among the nations. ³¹ Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and your abominations. ³² I

am not doing this for your sake," declares the Lord God, "let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel!"

Jeremiah wrote:

²⁷ "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and with the seed of beast.²⁸ As I have watched over them to pluck up, to break down, to overthrow, to destroy and to bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant," declares the Lord. ²⁹ "In those days they will not say again, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'³⁰ But everyone will die for his own iniquity; each man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth will be set on edge. ³¹ "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. ³³ "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the Lord, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

These passages proclaimed God's promise of the New Covenant to the Jews. God spoke through Ezekiel to the house of Israel (Ezekiel 36.22) and through Jeremiah to Israel and Judah

(Jeremiah 31.27, 31).⁶ Thus, God addressed all twelve tribes of the Jewish nation. God told the Jews He would fulfill His promise not because of any merit in them but because of His name, which they had profaned among the Gentiles. The manner in which God expressed His promise indicated its sovereign nature: it would come about solely on the basis of His character and integrity. The purpose and effect of the indwelling Holy Spirit would be that the Jews would keep His Law. Notice that Gentiles were *not* addressed. God gave no promise that Gentiles would be filled with His Holy Spirit.

The prophetic timetable was sketchy. Peter quoted Joel because he believed fulfillment of the prophecies of Ezekiel and Jeremiah had begun and that fulfillment of the rest of the prophecies was near. The prophets had revealed God would exercise His wrath, restore Israel to their land with the boundaries He had promised Abraham (Genesis 15.18 cf. Exodus 23.31; Deuteronomy 11.24), establish His kingdom in which the Messiah would reign, and give the Jews the indwelling Holy Spirit. The order of the fulfillment of these promises was impossible to discern clearly. Peter understood the events of God's program but not their timing. Since the Holy Spirit had come, he assumed the rest of the prophecy would be fulfilled soon. Thus, he quoted the rest of Joel's prophecy about the sun being turned to darkness and the moon to blood. He understood Israel had to repent, for the Lord had stated He would not return until every Jew declared, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matthew 23.37-39). Because of this, when the Jews asked Peter on the Day of Pentecost what they must do in light of having crucified their Messiah, he told "all the house of Israel," "every one of you" to "repent and be baptized for the remission of sins" (Acts 2.36-39, 21).

What Pentecost Was Not

Peter only addressed Jews at Pentecost. For him to have addressed Gentiles was unthinkable. The Lord had no ministry

to Gentiles in the three years He spent with His disciples and neither had they (Matthew 10.5-7). After His resurrection, He had told them to go to the nations (Matthew 28.19-20) but instructed them to go to Jews first (Acts 1.8). This was in accordance with the prophetic program. God had revealed Israel would bless the Gentiles as early as the Abrahamic covenant. This promise anticipated Jews being established in their kingdom (Zechariah 8.20-23; cf. Psalm 2.6-8; Isaiah 49.5-6, 60.1-3; Jeremiah 4.1-2). For this to happen, the entire nation had to repent (Matthew 23.37-39).

The definition of the Church, the body of Christ, is that organism composed of Jew and Gentile, who are equal in Christ (Galatians 3.26-28). If Pentecost was the birth of the Church, why did Peter not include Gentiles in his message? Why did Peter not mention the cross, salvation through the blood of Christ, or forgiveness of sins based upon the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ? Why did he not offer salvation by faith alone, apart from works? Why did he not say a word about the body of Christ? To press further, why did Peter or any of the Twelve or James *never* mention the body of Christ?

Such questions reveal the sandy foundation of the argument that the Church began at Pentecost. The reason Peter proclaimed none of those things was because he did not know them. Peter knew nothing about God's salvation based upon the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, of salvation by faith alone apart from works, of the significance of the blood of Christ, or of the one body of Jew and Gentile equal in Christ. Peter knew *nothing* of the Church or the teachings associated with it. Peter knew God's prophetic, kingdom program. He knew the prophecies of the prophets which Jesus had proclaimed throughout His earthly ministry (Romans 15.8). The reason the prophets revealed nothing about the Church, the body of Christ, was they knew nothing of it. God had kept this revelation a *secret* until He revealed it to Paul (Ephesians 3.1-7). The prophets had revealed Gentiles would be blessed

through Israel in the kingdom. But the kingdom had not come. The kingdom did not come and could not come because Israel refused to repent.

Great confusion has resulted from failure to understand that the events of Pentecost happened to believing Jews, not to Gentiles, not to the Church, the body of Christ. One area of confusion has been the speaking in tongues. Some denominations and churches teach believers are supposed to speak in tongues because that was the evidence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But what happened at Pentecost had nothing to do with the Church. Everything that happened at Pentecost involved Jews. The advent of the Holy Spirit was a fulfillment of God's promises to the Jewish people, not the Church. There were no Gentiles (except possibly a few proselytes) among the Jerusalem believers. No Gentile evangelism existed. Indeed, even several years after Pentecost, Jewish believers in Jerusalem berated Peter when they learned he had gone to the house of the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 11.1-3). This should convince any but the most recalcitrant of the impossibility that the Church began at Pentecost.

But that's not all. Other problems exist. John declared Jesus would baptize Jewish believers with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.33), a fact Jesus confirmed (John 15.26, 16.7). These declarations indicated Jesus was the baptizer, the agent of baptism. However, Paul taught that members of the Church, the body of Christ, are not baptized by Christ but are baptized by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the agent who baptizes one into the body of Christ. Thus, Paul wrote:

¹² For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. ¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit

(1 Corinthians 12.12-13).

Thus, at Pentecost, Jewish believers were baptized by Christ. Believers of Paul's gospel, however, are not baptized by Christ but by the Holy Spirit. These are two separate baptisms. Furthermore, Luke did not write that Jewish believers at Pentecost were baptized into the body of Christ. Those who believed the gospel of the kingdom were baptized by Christ so they could fulfill the promises of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Those who have believed the gospel of the grace of God, Paul's gospel, have been baptized by the Holy Spirit in order to become members of the Church, the body of Christ. The Church is not under the administration of the Mosaic Law but under the administration of grace (Romans 6.14).⁷ These baptisms indicate two separate and distinct programs in God's salvific plan.

Another thing to note is that all believers were not indwelt with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. According to the Biblical record, some were indwelt later. Luke recorded:

¹ *It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples.* ² *He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit."* ³ *And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism."* ⁴ *Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus."* ⁵ *When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.* ⁶ *And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying.* ⁷ *There were in all about twelve men (Acts 19.1-7).*

These were Jews who had believed John's gospel. They were saved. But they had not received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Indeed, they had heard nothing about the Holy Spirit. When Paul heard their testimony, he laid his hands upon them and they received the Holy Spirit.⁸ We should note a few things here. Acts is a transitional book. For a period of time both God's prophetic, kingdom program and the Church program overlapped. For example the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God (Paul's gospel) operated from the time Paul received it (probably when he was in Arabia) until the Council of Jerusalem. After the Council of Jerusalem, only Paul's gospel was valid (Acts 15.11; Galatians 1.6-9). Thus, because of Israel's rejection of her Messiah, God's prophetic program to Israel began to be replaced by God's program for the Church, which He had revealed to Paul. That they received the Holy Spirit through Paul is an indicator of this transition. They spoke in tongues for this was what had happened when the Holy Spirit that had occurred at Pentecost. Since they were saved under that program it was fitting they should have the same experience as the believers at Pentecost.

Lastly, we should note that when one is saved by believing Paul's gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4) he is immediately indwelt, baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.12-13). This baptism has no sign (such as speaking in tongues). Tongues no longer exist in the Church, having ceased long ago (1 Corinthians 13.8). But even when they operated in the Church, they were not a sign for believers but for unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14.22).

Conclusion

The Scriptures indicate clearly that the Church, the body of Christ, did not begin at Pentecost. Pentecost was a Jewish feast and God's program for Israel was still in full effect. God had revealed nothing about a body of Jew and Gentiles being equal in Christ. What He had revealed was that Gentiles

would be blessed through Israel. The Church was a secret God revealed to the apostle Paul alone (Ephesians 2.11-13, 3.1-9).

¹ The formal argument that the Church began at Pentecost is essentially as follows: 1. The Church is the Body of Christ (Ephesians 1.22-23; 1 Corinthians 12.12-13; Colossians 1.24), 2. Membership into the Body of Christ is through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.13; Galatians 3.27), 3. The Church was future from Christ's pre-cross ministry (Matthew 16.18), 4. The Church was future from Christ pre-ascension ministry (Acts 1.4-5), 5. The Church was born on the day of Pentecost with the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1-4 cf. Acts 11.16-17), 6. After Pentecost, the term ἐκκλησία, which had occurred previously only in Matthew 16.18 and 18.17, becomes common, e.g. Acts 5.11, 8.1, 8.3, 9.31, etc.—23 times in Acts and 115 times outside of the Matthew passages. See the author's study, [The Church \(The Body of Christ\)](#) for analysis of this subject.

² During the seven years of the Antichrist' rule (Tribulation), the Beast and False Prophet, will establish world government and world religion. Theocracy is the normal form of government. It encompasses man's body, soul, and spirit. Satan will create the ultimate perversion of this form of government into terrifying totalitarian rule in which he will seek to control every aspect of man's will to include the worship of himself.

³ The reader should note the change of pronouns in Genesis 12.3. One would expect the passage to read, "And I will bless them that bless you, and curse them that curse you." Instead, it reads "him," not "them" in the latter part of the verse. The reason for this change is that behind all cursing of Israel is Satan. Thus, the Abrahamic covenant is God's specific warning that antisemitism is Satanic.

⁴ See the author's study on [Israel's covenants](#).

⁵ The "fire" was not the cloven tongues of fire at Pentecost

but God's judgment on the earth (2 Thessalonians 1.8). Peter's quote of Joel of the "sun being turned to darkness and the moon to blood" referenced this judgment (Acts 2.19-20).

⁶ Gentiles were not in view in the promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Neither was the Church, the body of Christ, since it did not exist until God revealed it to the apostle Paul. It was through a new revelation which the ascended Lord gave to Paul that the Church enjoys the benefit of the indwelling Holy Spirit which was part of the New Covenant. The New Covenant was an essential element of God's prophetic program to Israel. The Old Testament prophets knew nothing of the Church, the body of Christ, much less that the Holy Spirit would indwell its members. Jesus taught nothing of the Church in His earthly ministry. The ascended, glorified Lord revealed that truth later, to Paul, after He saved and commissioned him as the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13).

⁷ See the author's study, [Paul and the Law](#).

⁸ Verse 5 continues verse 4 in Acts 19. There was one water baptism. These men were not rebaptized as some have taught. Luke's point was that they had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus when they believed John's gospel. Paul did not baptize them again. Their deficiency was not that they had not been baptized but that they did not have the Holy Spirit. To accomplish this, Paul laid his hands on them and "baptized" them (v.6). This "baptism" was waterless even as had been the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. What occurred here occurred earlier with Peter and John (Acts 8.14-17) before Paul was saved.

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